

Sketches of the Algarve

by Günther Höser

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About this book

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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To Cobette,
partner of all my adventures,
and the love of my life.

Gunther Hoser

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Introduction

When we decided to go and live in the Algarve, it was not a thoroughly pondered decision. In fact, it was more like “close your eyes and stick a pin on a map”. Following a family tragedy, we took the decision to leave France, where we had been based for quite a while in Provence. However, we had visited and valued so many places on earth, that we had a hard time deciding where to move next.

We had reached an age where we no longer wanted to move our household every couple of years, so we dressed a shortlist of our favourite places and noted all the criteria we thought could be of importance either now or in the future. Although we had never been to Portugal, we added the Algarve to the list after having recently seen a documentary and thought it looked like a nice place. The Algarve came into competition with a dozen places spread over four continents and various islands. However, when we finished the complex calculations, to our great surprise the Algarve came out on top of the list, and by far! So after crosschecking and getting the confirmation of this fact a few times, we sold our house, put our belongings in storage, packed two suitcases and drove off to discover our new home country.

I must admit that coming from one of the most picturesque places in Southern France, the Algarvean scenery, as seen from the highway, might initially appear monotonous.

The low hills, covered with dark green vegetation interspersed with patches of brown earth, were a bit disappointing. However, as soon as we arrived at the place we had rented in a small village West of Loulé, we felt “at home”. We had been told about the exceptional beauty of the Algarvean beaches, the scenic Portuguese villages, and the unique climate granting more than 300 days of sunshine with clear blue skies, but nothing had prepared us for the people.

Portuguese in general are socially oriented people, open minded and welcoming, while exceptionally proud of their culture and partial to everything that is Portuguese. Whereas Northern Portugal is rapidly developing and catching up with its West European partners, Southern Portugal with the Alentejo and the Algarve is lagging behind. The area has been notoriously overlooked by social, economic and political planning. The prevailing idea is that people in the Algarve should be happy enough with their climate and their beaches.

There are obvious inconveniences to this state of affairs, but we also perceived a major advantage. While touristic development is chiefly concentrated along the coast, the provincial towns and little villages North of this area have preserved a touch of the past and a laid back sociability that

has been lost in most other places of Western Europe, sometimes for more than fifty years.

Put in a nutshell, the Algarve can be separated into four distinct stripes of land that run almost parallel to the coast. The Northern stripe is the authentic Portuguese backcountry, with small mountain villages lost in the hills. This part is almost unknown to the crowds of tourists that each year, during the two hottest months, multiply the population of the Algarve by twenty.

Travelling southward, you enter the *barrocal*, a former pastoral area, which has become a fast developing, but still sparsely built residential zone with the provincial towns of Loulé and São Bras de Alportel right in the middle. Below the *barrocal*, between the A22 highway and the coast lies a densely packed mixed agricultural and commercial service area, which supplies the Algarve with all it needs.

The coastline itself has not much in common with the rest of the Algarve and resembles many touristic shores in the world, where hotels, housing schemes and apartment blocks are interspersed with exclusive gated communities made of 3-million-plus-properties surrounded by impeccably groomed golf courses. Only the extreme Eastern and Western corner of the coast are still exempt from this concreting effort.

To be fair, I would detach a fifth band from the coastline: the Algarvean beaches, which are of exceptional beauty. Although they are heavily crowded during the high season, you can even feel lonely the rest of the year, when you walk

the endless stretches of beige sand, between the dark blue sea and the red-brown or ochre rocks, often topped by stark green vegetation.

Apart from large metropolitan areas, the Algarve has probably the most diversified population of any region in Europe. Although Portuguese still represent the majority, you can encounter every West, East and North European nation, as well as Asians, South and North Americans and nationals from various African countries.

While segregation exists, it is mainly economical and not based on religion, the colour of the skin or the country of origin, with one notable exception: the Iberian gypsies who are mostly ignored, and largely distrusted. Yet, when you see one of their high wheeled, colourful, horse-drawn buggies on the road, they seem like fleeting appearances from another place and time.

On arrival, other expatriates told us, “You’ll either love it or hate it here.” It is impossible to resume in a few sentences why the Algarve and its people have such a polarising effect on visitors, in particular those coming to live in this part.

One thing that struck us is how much we had become used to stress and technology induced seclusion in our professional and private lives. The Algarve is a place in slow motion, where people still take their time, for themselves and for you. Someone you have never met will smile at you

in the street and say *bom dia*¹ when you pass them in a village. People still care about their neighbours; they will bring you small gifts and may propose some help and advice, even if you did not ask for it. This is one of the rare places where money is not yet the sole motivation of social interaction. Portuguese people pick what they consider useful from the modern world of material goods, but hold on to their values.

Together with my partner I tried to understand why we love this place so much, and wondered how we could pay a tribute to its people who welcomed us and made us feel at home. Finally we decided that short stories would be a good way to translate our experience.

This is a book of fiction, of small adventures, where magic is woven into everyday events. But it's also our life. Each story in this book depicts facets of the people and the life in the Algarve. All together, they will hopefully leave the reader with a similar feeling of fondness as we have for the endearing Portuguese people confronted with a fast changing world.

For us, life in the Algarve is a bit like enjoying the light from far away stars: when it reaches our eyes, the time the light was emitted has already gone by.

¹ Good morning



Flowers live longer

It was the last beautiful day before the autumn storms. Raffi stood wagging his tail in the yard, while I was leaning against Flávia's front door in the sun, holding a glass of lemon water in my hand. Flávia laughed as Raffi came too close to one of her cats, who hissed at him. He quickly came back to us to reassure himself.

“They'll probably never get used to him” I said.

“Glaucia doesn't care for dogs, she had a bad experience I suppose, and she is already quite old and wants her peace. I understand her.”

“Don't you like dogs?”

“On the contrary, I like them very much. However, nine cats are enough for me. Dogs need exercise, and I cannot walk long distances anymore.”

The wind and sun made their shadow play under the huge carob tree in front of Flávia's house. Six of her nine cats were scattered around. Raffi would have loved to chase one off and run after it, but instead he only sniffed large circles around them. I sat down on the stone bench, in the shade, next to Flávia.

"You know, I have a friend, sometimes you remind me of her. She is your age, lives alone as well, with a dozen cats, perhaps more by now."

"Perhaps?" Flávia looked at me. "That sounds a bit uncertain if she is actually your friend."

I watched the birds eating at the cat's feeding bowl. It all seemed so peaceful, six dozing cats circled by a sniffing dog and a few brave birds eating on the floor, all of them in this confined space. There was only the sound of the warm wind passing through the big tree.

Flávia had never been very talkative. She hardly told me anything about herself. I knew that she was born in Angola and that she used to travel a lot. She bought this little house only eight years ago. Since she has no money for artisans, she does everything herself, the best she can. I was never inside the house, but her small garden looked well maintained, although the yard had a touch of negligence, a seemingly orderly mess, like the big table in our living room. A few weeks ago, when I passed by her house with Raffi, we had exchanged a few kind words, and I took the opportunity to improve my Portuguese with her. Over time our conversation became a bit more elaborate.

I liked the peace and the serenity in her place. As if the time were switched off, or just did not matter. Moreover, her cats never ran away when Raffi came. This, of course, astonished him, and perhaps helped to improve his relation

to cats in general. Therefore, we had two good reasons to stop at Flávia's house.

"She has not written for a while", I said.

"Did you?" asked Flávia.

"At some point she didn't answer my letters anymore."

Down in the valley a dog barked, and then it was quiet again. A cat stretched her back and yawned. She walked leisurely to the bowl, where the birds jumped to the side at the very last moment. The cat sniffed the bowl and sat down beside it, ignoring the wagging dog at her side. After a few attempts to approach, the birds flew into the tree, where they were probably waiting for a better opportunity.

"And you don't know how she is?"

"Her son told me she's OK. She lives far away and we have not seen each other for a very long time. Her letters were special, witty, and funny, I miss them."

Flávia bent down and picked something from the floor. Then, without a word, she went into the kitchen. I thought it was time to leave, and attached Raffi to his leash. When I turned to call '*Adeus*', Flávia stood in her doorway.

"You should write to her once more."

"What for, she won't answer."

"Explain that flowers live longer than we do."

So far I had never heard Flávia talk nonsense. Over time, I got the impression that she was rather down-to-earth, perhaps a bit distant or indifferent to many things. However, this remark seemed odd, even bizarre. She laughed when she noticed my astonished look.

“You see, flowers don’t know that they’re transient. For us, whatever we do has already passed. We are always looking at the train leaving the station. And we do not know if there is another one coming. Probably not.”

I walked slowly to the gate and stood there for a moment. When I turned back, Flávia was still standing in her doorway, smiling at me.

“Tell her to take a close look at flowers, any flower will do. If we have something in common, she will understand.”

Then she waved briefly, turned around and disappeared into the house.



The wall

Standing at the edge of the terrace of his pub, with his hands resting on his hips, Ricardo looked towards the other side of the square. “You bet! I thought it was an earthquake!”

Ricardo is the owner of the *Café da Praça*, in front of the church that towers above the main road. The five-meter high wall retaining the church square along the street had collapsed the night before. A bulldozer had worked all morning to reopen the road, and now a few council workers were securing the site and sweeping the debris.

The terrace of the *Café da Praça* is my favourite place for a morning coffee, at least on sunny days. This might be a small village, but it prides itself of several pubs. Most of them are segregated, visited by either villagers, expats, youngsters or tourists, but Ricardo’s *Café da Praça* has a fair mix of all and is located right in the middle of the village, with its terrace shaded by old jacaranda trees.

“That wall was probably a few hundred years old”, Ricardo explained to no one in particular, “I wonder why it caved in just now, while it hadn’t rained for several weeks!”

“Probably the devil. Ask the priest.”

Tiago had been silent until now. Normally he sits on a bench on the other side of the road, next to the now collapsed wall, where he usually spends a good part of the day. He looked at Ricardo as if he wanted to add something, but then turned his head and sucked on the unlit cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

The bulldozer shuddered, blew a cloud of exhaust fumes and disappeared behind the presbytery. The workers had finished cleaning the street. Two were now sitting on Tiago's bench, smoking and watching a colleague standing in front of them, who gesticulated, obviously explaining his theories of why this happened to a small group of white collars who had arrived a bit earlier by car.

"You seem rather gloomy today, Tiago. Let me offer you a coffee." Usually I see him in eager discussions with villagers, or sitting relaxed on his bench, dozing and watching amused how others busy themselves around the square. It seemed rather odd to see him staring constantly at the place where the wall had been until last night. "You don't seriously believe there's a devil who'd pushed that wall, do you?"

He briefly turned to look at me, while I took a chair at his table and asked Ricardo for *duas bicas*². I had spoken many times with Tiago, but always small talk or rather about mundane matters, such as commenting on the weather, local politics or what happened around the square. He never

² two short coffees

asked me personal questions and never talked about his past or present life.

“Do I look like a *beato*³?” Tiago took his cigarette out of his mouth and pointed to the other side of the street. “No, that wall, it brought back a memory, that’s all.”

Knowing Tiago’s usual reserve, I did not expect him to elaborate any further and rather watched a small group of dogs playing in the middle of the road. The council workers and the suits had left, and as the road was still closed, the dogs were running after each other, constantly switching the roles of chaser and chased, following a complicated rite.

The driver of a CTT Espresso was carrying yesterday’s undelivered parcels into the post office, which is installed in a small side room of the corner shop *A Esquina*. Burdened with a huge pile of packets of various sizes and forms, he patiently listened to a well-tanned elderly man in shorts complaining in English that he was all day at home waiting for the parcel that he now had to pick up himself. Obviously, the driver did not speak English, and I just wanted to get up to mediate, when Tiago started.

“It was in 1971, during these stupid *guerras do ultramar*⁴, the one in Mozambique. It was my second week in the country, we were sent to the North. But my unit had been ambushed, and most of my comrades had died. I was

³ devout

⁴ oversea wars – colonial wars in Africa

rescued and patched up with three others in a Red Cross hospital in Lourenço Marques, which is now Maputo. I didn't know any of them, but they were all Portuguese. We were placed together in one room with four beds in a row. The room was L-shaped and in the bend behind the corner was a fifth bed, next to a window. It was occupied by a black guy."

"We didn't know if the ambush that killed our companions was operated by the Frelimo or the Renamo, but that didn't really matter to us. There were few blacks in the Portuguese army, so we thought chances were that the guy in the corner was a rebel. Fortunately, none of us was able to move; otherwise we may have killed him right away. We were all rookies and didn't yet know that rebels never made it into a hospital."

"The first day we spilled out our stories, totally ignoring the black guy. He tried several times to participate in our conversation, but we treated him like thin air. After a few days of bullshitting between us, still strapped to various devices and unable to move, we got seriously bored. There was no TV, no radio, nothing to distract us."

"It probably started when one of us complained that the guy in the corner could at least look out of the window, while we were staring at the peeling paint on the wall. So the black guy offered to tell us what he saw. He said his name was Asraf. He was a translator and driver of a Portuguese officer. He caught several bullets a week before us. In civil life he was a teacher in Pemba, a small beach town up in the North. He

said that the window offered a beautiful view of the square in front of the hospital.”

“From then on, most of the day we listened to him describing what he saw from the window. He described the gorgeous buildings around the square, the flowering trees, the countless birds of all colours and shapes that played in the sky or bickered in the trees, the beautiful girls in their colourful dresses, queuing up at visiting time, waiting patiently while laughing and teasing each other, the luxurious cars and their groomed passengers. Sometimes he reported small accidents as well, which resulted in a lot of pushing and gesticulating.”

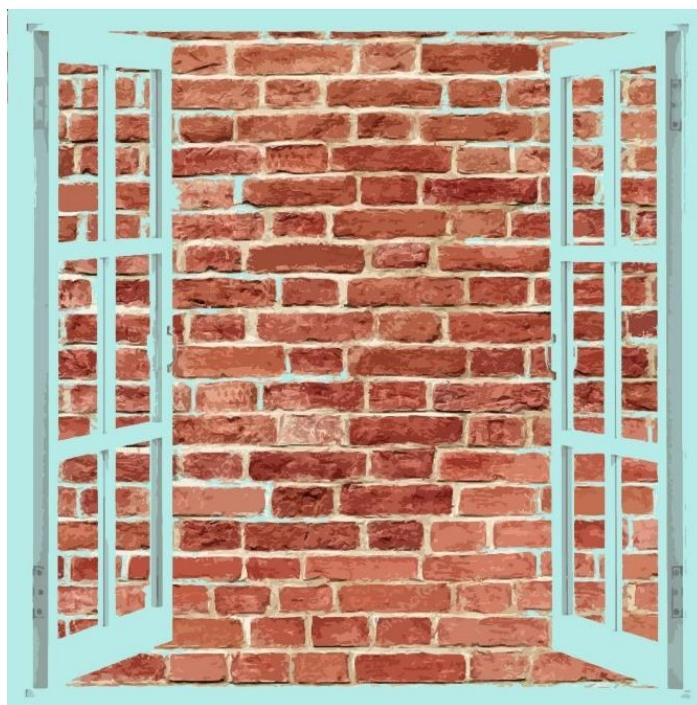
“Often Asraf was reminded of funny events in Pemba or some other place. Most of the time he made us laugh, and sometimes caught our attention narrating his breath taking encounters with wild animals in the bush, or during bad weather, while fishing with his uncle out at sea.”

“He was a good storyteller, Asraf. But one day, late in the evening the doctor came to tell him that he could go home. There were a great number of wounded soldiers arriving and they needed all available beds. We wished Asraf well and when the nurse came to change the sheets, we threw a coin to decide who would take his bed next to the window. It was one of the three other guys, I forgot his name. None of us could yet move alone, so the nurse had to help him to change into the bed in the corner.”

“Next morning, when she opened the curtains, our friend exclaimed ‘I can’t believe it! That’s not possible!’”

“Tell us, we said, don’t keep it for yourself!””

“There is nothing to tell you guys’, he screamed, ‘In front of the window, there is a wall! You can’t see anything from here, nothing else than this fucking wall. He made it all up!””



“A few days later a nurse told us that Asraf was taken prisoner by the Frelimo, on his way home to Pemba. We never found out what happened to him.”

For a few moments there was silence. Three old women looked at the gaping hole in the wall and up at the church, none of them commenting.

Ricardo, who had also listened to Tiago, was mute for a while. Then he stood up, took our two cups and said, “I’m sure he talked his way out of it, a guy like that.” Then he disappeared into the Café.

“Yeah, sure he did” Tiago answered to the street, “sure he did”.

An expensive lesson

Heavily loaded with a pile of tiles, the worker on the top of the *Café da Praça* swayed dangerously, almost falling over when dropping the pile near the edge of the roof.

“Ei, Manoel, ainda teve uma festa na noite passada⁵? ” Tiago shouted at him, laughing, and turning towards us with a wink he explained “Manoel should stop drinking when he works on the roof. It’s only a two story house, but if he falls, his boss will be in trouble.”

We all stared up at Manoel, who disappeared behind the gable to fetch another load of tiles.

“Perhaps he’s looking towards early retirement with a nice disability pension.” Ian was new in the village. He had moved over from the UK when he retired last year. Although he was very social and obviously looking to make friends, he usually preferred to sit with the other expats in the café, rather than mixing with the Portuguese on this side of the square.

Due to the roof works, Ricardo had closed the terrace of his pub today, so Ian had walked over to watch the new distraction with the rest of us. A group of about ten men and women had now gathered, some had come out of the pub

⁵ “Hey, Manoel, you partied again last night.”

and the corner shop *A Esquina*, when they heard Tiago shouting and saw us all looking up towards the roof.

“He wouldn’t be able to live with a Portuguese disability pension”. Fernando is usually rather taciturn and rarely takes part in any conversation. I turned towards him, surprised that he understood English, although he replied in Portuguese.

Fernando is a gardener, in fact more like a handyman, mostly doing some gardening for the expats around village. When he was not working, he joined the others on the square. I never talked to him in person, because most of the time I am enjoying my coffee under the jacaranda trees of the *Café da Praça*, spending my time observing the morning events unfolding on the square.

Today Fernando seemed to be unusually talkative, because he continued. “They’d better hurry to cover the roof. There will be heavy rain starting tomorrow” he said more to himself, while looking up to the roof.

It was hot, and some of us blinked at the deep blue sky. “I bet a beer that you are mistaken” said Ian, turned towards Fernando. Then, smiling towards the group, he added, “Anyone is welcome to raise the stakes”. Fernando looked at him, turned and walked into the pub.

“Did I offend him?” Ian seemed surprised. “No, don’t worry” said Tiago, “Fernando doesn’t drink alcohol anymore.

But you should be careful when betting on weather with Fernando. I remember a story he told me not long ago..."

Hearing this, some of the bystanders turned to sit on the bench under the newly repaired wall. Tiago's narrations are much appreciated, and he has an endless supply. I am convinced that he prefers to tell stories, rather than gossiping or complaining about the local politicians, as most of the others do.

Manoel had lined up three piles of tiles along the edge of the roof and just turned to fetch another one, when Tiago started. "It was last year, beginning of December. It'd been unusually dry for some time, and there wasn't much to do for Fernando. So he accepted to help a German guy who'd just bought a house up in Goldra, his name is Bernd. This Bernd wanted to do some light repair work in his pool, replacing some mosaics and cleaning the joints."

"They used a pump to empty the pool and washed the walls with a pressure cleaner. It was one of those pools with a diving pit, so the water gathered at the lowest part. Fernando said he spent quite a while to scoop out the last hundred or so litres and dry the floor with a cloth."

"Before he left, he suggested to cover the pool for the night. But Bernd only laughed at Fernando's suggestion, explaining that the German weather channel doesn't forecast any rain for the following two weeks and a floating cover wouldn't be helpful anyway."

“When Fernando returned the next morning, he saw Bernd staring down the pool. There was a big puddle of water at the bottom.”

“That’s the dew” Rosalia said. There are not many women partaking in the discussions on the square, apart from Fridays after the weekly vegetable market. However, as the owner of *A Esquina*, Rosalia is an exception. When there are no clients in her corner shop, she joins the men on the square. She likes sharing her opinion or ‘provide some sound advice to the men’, and she has strong opinions on almost everything.

“A big puddle of water from dew?” Ian was preparing another bet, this time with Rosalia, and I wanted to caution him, when Rosalia turned around and replied “In the Algarve we have a lot of condensation, due to the proximity of the ocean and the enormous temperature drops at night. Didn’t you ever wonder why it’s so green after weeks without rain?” Ian looked a bit troubled, but not totally convinced. So Tiago continued.

“That’s exactly what Bernd told Fernando, he didn’t want to believe it either. He waved Fernando’s comment away and said the water probably came out of the pipes, a back-flow from the pump. Then he ordered Fernando to make sure all valves are shut, empty the pool pump, take a hoover and suck the pipes dry. After that he should scoop up the water from the bottom and dry the floor. In Fernando’s opinion, they should rather hurry to finish the repair work, because in

December the rain could start any day. But after an incredulous head shake from Bernd, he kept his mouth shut and did as he was told.”

“When he arrived the next morning, Bernd was waiting for him at the pool. He pointed at the big puddle of water at the bottom and asked if Fernando was sure he had completely dried the pipes. Before Fernando could answer, he asked him to rather do some gardening. He had asked for a plumber to come and replace a few valves that must be leaking.”

“The plumber arrived at noon, and told Bernd that there was nothing wrong with his taps and valves, the water that gathered in the morning at the bottom of his pool was a result of the dew. With the weather unusually hot during the day and close to zero at night, there was a lot of condensation. Bernd asked him to change the valves anyway.”

On the other side of the square, Manoel was now swaying near the edge of the roof, watching a fellow worker who started laying the tiles.

“*Cuidado, Manoel, melhor sente-se*⁶” Tiago shouted up the roof, and then towards us “I get shaky knees seeing him boozed there on the roof.” “In that case don’t look, just continue” Rosalia wanted to know the end of the story. “Let me guess, the next morning...”

⁶ “Careful, Manoel, better sit down.”

“... the water was back” Tiago finished her sentence. “Bernd was completely pissed off, when Fernando arrived. He told Fernando he had phoned a builder and there was no need to continue in the pool, because he suspected that the cistern next to the pool was leaking, and that it needed to be fixed before anything else.”

“As the builder was in the vicinity, he arrived before Fernando had finished trimming the bushes around the pool. He heard the builder explaining that it’s probably only the dew that was collecting at the bottom. There was no way the cistern could leak into the pool, because it would be through two layers of waterproofed cement. For the same reason he didn’t believe the water came from the surrounding land or up through the bottom of the pool, which was another theory of Bernd.”

“Before leaving, the builder cautioned Bernd not to wait too long to refill the pool. Most pools are not built with reinforced concrete, and if it rains the walls might cave in. Bernd replied that there was ‘no rain in sight’.”

“After the builder left, he told Fernando that the water had probably gathered behind the mosaics and it would take a few days before the pool was completely dry. So Fernando should go home and come back next week. Fernando started to explain that he could start working on the walls, but Bernd only patted his shoulder and told him to come back the following week.”

“The rain started that weekend. A few drops on Saturday, a bit more on Sunday, and on Monday morning the sky was heavy, with no end of the rain in sight. Fernando phoned Bernd, and was told that according to the German weather forecast the rain won’t last. He shouldn’t worry and come back as soon as the rain had stopped.”

“But it rained for more than a week. By mid-December, Bernd phoned Fernando to tell him that he will take a short trip to Germany. He’ll be back in less than a week. Fernando suggested filling the pool and then to start anew in January, when the weather is usually dry. But Bernd didn’t want to waste 85 m³ of water when the rain could stop any day. He said not to worry, wished him a good week and hung up.”

Ricardo had brought a round of coffee and was leaning against the bench, listening and smiling. Once he looked up to the roof and shouted something, until a head appeared above the gable and answered back. We were all looking at Tiago, who had stopped talking and enjoyed our impatience. Finally Rosalia broke the silence. “Come on Tiago, so they never found out if it was the dew?”

Tiago smiled. “After a week of more rain, with no end in sight, Bernd sent Fernando a message, explaining that the weather being still bad in the Algarve, he and his wife had decided to spend Christmas with their children in Germany. Those were wet holidays, if you remember. It only stopped raining at the last day of the month.”

Tiago paused again asking Rosalia to fetch a packet of cigarettes for him. “Are you joking? First you finish your story” Rosalia replied. When we were all laughing, someone offered Tiago a cigarette. “Not my brand, but thanks anyway” Tiago lit the cigarette.

“When Fernando arrived early January at Bernd’s home, there was a bulldozer in front of the pool. With the continuous heavy rain for more than three weeks, the loamy soil had sucked up all the water and the walls of the pool had caved in. The builder was just explaining to Bernd that demolishing the old pool and building a new one of that size, with reinforced concrete, will cost him roughly 40k.”



“*O merda.*⁷ That’s a pricey lesson!” Rosalia laughed heartily. “At least he can’t blame the Portuguese for his misfortune.”

Tiago looked at Rosalia in way that showed his disapproval of her ironic remark and her joking about the poor Bernd.

Finally Ricardo, who had already heard the story a few times, asked what we all wanted to know. “In fact, Tiago, do you know if the German guy after all agreed to the explanation regarding the dew?”

Tiago grinned, “I asked Fernando the same thing. He told me, after what had happened to the pool; he felt it might not be appropriate to ask.”

Then he stood up, crossed the square and disappeared into the corner shop, closely followed by Rosalia.

⁷ Oh shit

In the post office

“Parece um pouco sombrio hoje ⁸.” Teresa looked with faked worry at Falco. The three of us were standing in the small room next to the corner shop *A Esquina*, which acts as the village post office. It was past nine and the employee had not yet raised the roller blind to start the day.

Falco did not look up, but stared fixedly at the floor when he answered, “I had a bad dream last night. I dreamed that I went to heaven”.

“You were in heaven?” Teresa laughed aloud. “That’s rather unexpected, but not a bad dream, and certainly not a reason to be grumpy.”

“I walked a long way through darkness” Falco continued. “After a while I saw an open door and a bright light behind. I went through the door and walked towards the light. There was a huge and beautiful palace. A man even older than me opened the gate and said that he will show me around.”

“I can still remember all the rooms we passed through, each one more dazzling than the next. For instance, in one brightly lit chamber was a huge sword on display and the old

⁸ You seem a bit gloomy today.

man explained that whoever owns this sword could rule the world.”

“There was a room with the giant book, which explained all the secrets of the universe. In the midst of another room stood a box made of pure gold, and the old man said whoever owns it will be always rich, without even working...”

Teresa looked bemused at Falco. “That sounds a bit like one of the stories I read to my children at night.” However, Falco paid no attention. He still stared at the floor in front of him while he continued in a monotonous voice “We went from room to room. At the end was a huge door. There the old man stopped and turned to face me. ‘Before we enter the paradise, he said, I have to offer you the choice. Either you follow me and spend all eternity in beauty and happiness, or you choose one of the things I showed you and return to earth. But you have only one wish.’”

“I know what I would have chosen” Teresa looked at me and winked, then, turning towards Falco, she added “but apparently you aren’t happy with your choice.”

Falco looked at her, but did not reply immediately. At that moment, the employee opened the roller blind, but none of us went to the counter.

I heard similar stories with only-one-choice, and was convinced that I knew what was coming. Falco will tell us that he asked for some time to consider, and bang! Doors

will be closed and he will be back on earth, with enough time to consider a choice, which was already wasted.

I can't be sure, but that day it seemed to me that Falco was genuinely shaken when he finally answered. "I woke up without telling the old guy what I wanted. Now I know, but how will I be able to find him again?"

"Keep dreaming." Teresa said. Then she patted his arm and walked to the counter.



Unexpected talents

“*Ei ei ei!*” Inês looked seriously worried. The driver of the big SUV tried for the third time to get into the small parking space. He had already bumped into the car behind him and this time threatened to topple Ines’ equipment, that she had left standing behind our bench, along the road.

Inês was a “*verradora de rua*”, a street sweeper employed by the Loulé council. It seemed to me that most of Loulé’s street sweepers were women, of all ages. Inês was about 60, with a small sturdy body and a smiling face.

The first time we met was last year, not far from where we were sitting now. Heavily loaded with market purchases, I had hurried back to my car, aware that I had widely exceeded the time marked on the parking receipt that you have to leave well in sight behind the windshield. Fines for unauthorized parking are hefty in Loulé, and you have to pay in person in a small-understaffed office, waiting for your turn. It is an efficient way to educate people.

When I neared the place where I had left my car, along Loulé’s *Avenida José Costa Mealha*, not far from the market, I saw a street sweeper fiddling with the wipers of my convertible. It was not the newest model and not in

exceptional condition, but when you are attached to your motor, you develop a protective attitude.

My first idea was that Loulé's street sweepers now also distribute fines, or else that she picked some leaves or litter from the hood. But then I rejected both ideas as ridiculous.

When I came nearer, I saw that she had slipped a parking receipt behind the left wiper. It was a valid one. A bit bewildered I turned around to look at the sweeper, who casually threw a shovel of litter into her bin, smiled towards me and pulled her wheeled bin a bit further.

I followed to thank and also reimburse her for the ticket, along with a tip. However, when she saw me pulling out my wallet, she laughed. "Don't worry for the parking ticket, I found it next to your car on the ground and thought it'd be a waste to throw it into the bin."

The week after, when I went to the market, I had brought a small box of chocolates for her. After all, she had prevented me from getting a fine. I did not see her, and was just putting the box back into the car, when someone behind my back said, "I hope that you calculated your time correctly today."

Inês had a broad smile on her face. I handed her the chocolate and offered a coffee in the nearby kiosk. She declined both. Apparently she was not allowed to keep anything she found on the street. How would she prove that the chocolates where a gift.

We met a few times during the following year, mostly on Saturdays, when I went to the market. Sometimes we exchanged only banter, while I walked past, usually carrying more than 5 kilos of fruits and vegetables in each hand. Other times we talked a bit longer, and occasionally we even sat on one of the benches of the promenade, as we did today.

The *Avenida José Costa Mealha* is probably the most charming street in Loulé. Bordered by an assortment of tastefully restored old Portuguese townhouses, mixed with ugly blocks from the 60s and also some run-down buildings, the two lanes are separated by a very large promenade, paved with grey and black cobblestones which design arabesques.

Although Portugal is known for its pretty *calçadas*⁹, the two kilometre long pavement of the *Avenida José Costa Mealha* must be somehow exceptional, because it is shaded by long rows of jacaranda trees. During the month of May, when these trees develop their clouds of blueish purple flowers above the street, the *avenida* gets particularly impressive.

The SUV had given up squeezing into the parking space and drove away, to the great relief of a few dozen drivers who had waited patiently behind. “These guys have no feeling for the size of their cars and seem to be used to

⁹ traditional Portuguese pavement, made with flat pieces of stones arranged in a pattern or image

getting things their way. I hope that I didn't scare him." Inês chuckled. "Most of the time we seem to be transparent, but sometimes people complain about us to the council. They say we overlooked a piece of paper, a dog poop or a cigarette butt, or that we bumped into their car." "And the council?" I ask. "If the person is known to be a nagger, they tell us not to worry and always be nice to the public. But most people don't even take any notice of us."

We were sitting in front of the municipal Conservatory, where two students mishandled their instruments. Inês turned around. "Either the teacher uses earplugs or he went out to fetch a coffee." I was surprised that she had noticed the two would-be-musicians. "Do you play an instrument?" I asked. "I have a violin" she replied "I know how to use it, learned it when I worked for *Equipe Lua*."

Inês had an eventful life. After school, she was traveling several years, mostly in Central Asia. When she came back to Portugal, she found a place working as a woman of all trades in the Portuguese version of the 'Cirque du Soleil', a company called '*Equipe Lua*', or Moon Team.

"I love it when children learn music, but obviously they need a good teacher. It reminds me of a funny story, when *Equipe Lua* had to replace a violinist who wanted to leave, because her boyfriend didn't accept that she travelled most of the year. Although I was still fairly new to my job, the director asked me to organize the casting and assist the audition."

“We were a small team, almost unknown at the time, and on the day of the audition, only three candidates showed up: one very elegant woman dressed in a suit, a rather average looking nervous girl and a scruffy dishevelled guy looking like a bum. I didn’t see any of them fitting in with the Moon Team and was a bit worried that our director might be disappointed with my catch.”

“The first to enter the director’s office was the elegant woman. She was in her thirties, stunning and obviously rich. Her violin box was made of exotic wood, draped with an exquisite snakeskin and had an internal padding of rich velvet, while the violin was covered with precious fabrics.”

“The instrument was magnificent and she handled it with care. She was obviously a accomplished musician and the director was clearly amazed that he could replace his leaving violinist with such an experienced person. It seemed to me that he also was besotted by the pretty woman, when he told her that he really liked her music ...and her looks. Only, there were two more candidates waiting. She should leave her phone number and he will for sure get back to her in the afternoon.”

“Then I asked the nervous girl to come in. Looking at her, I wanted to abbreviate her suffering, so she could go back home and hide. She looked worried and opened her violin box with trembling hands. But when she looked at her instrument, her face smoothed over to a tender smile, and her hands went calm. The way she played was bewitching.

She had chosen a Brahms sonata from Opus 108 in D Minor, that she played by heart.”

“Beginning in a gently understated way, disarming and immediate, over the course of the movements the luscious tone she drew from her instrument bestowed a visceral quality to this expansive melody.”

“When she stopped, I was in trance and the director was enthusiastic. Obviously he couldn’t figure, why such an accomplished musician would want to join his company, but he was too afraid to ask. He told her that he would hire her on the spot, but it would be uncourteous towards the last candidate, if he doesn’t at least listen to him. She should leave her phone number, so he could call her later in the afternoon to finalize her contract.”

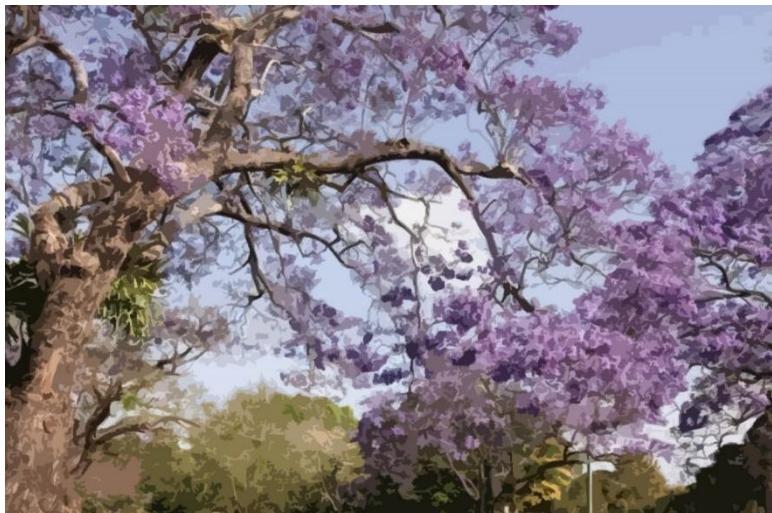
“The bum came into the office and slammed his box on the director’s desk. He was a bit smelly and when he opened his shabby casing, he extracted an instrument that obviously had seen better days. He spent at least five minutes trying to tune the four strings, and when he started to play the “Angry White Boy Polka”, which is in fact written for an accordion, he screeched off-key and with such terrible dissonance that I had real pity for the poor violin.”

Inês stood up and stretched. She looked at the amazing sea of flowers above our heads and took a deep breath. “I love this promenade, I love this town and I think I even love my work” she said. Then, with a wink at me, she went behind

the bench, picked up her equipment and pushed it a bit further down the street.

“Wait, wait, Ines, you didn’t finish your story!” I hurried behind her. “Whom did he finally hire, your director?”

She looked at me, shaking her head. “The second one, the superb violinist” she replied laughing. “Wasn’t that obvious?” Then she lifted her shovel, threw some litter into the bin and went to the other side of the street.



Two shepherds and a toad

The scenery was stunning. Under an intensely blue sky the gentle slopes of red brown earth, sprinkled with thousands of dark green trees, rolled towards the large expanse of the coast, where patches of white washed houses lethargically convened towards a large silvery blotch on the edge of the glittering ocean that stretched in all directions as far as our eyes could reach.

"At this height the horizon above the sea is about 60 kilometres away" I said. Rúben looked at me with questioning eyes, so I continued, "It's strange, isn't it? When you stand on the beach you see only eight kilometres." Colette looked at the sky, probably to hide her grin, because I was trying to appear knowledgeable. Until now, we had listened to Rúben explaining the many advantages of goats, their undisputed intelligence and their many funny habits, so I wanted to contribute a bit of *my* knowledge to the conversation.

We were on our way back from visiting friends who had recently bought a small farm in the mountains, near *Cachopo*, where they tried to make a living from olives, carobs and wine. On our way back we got lost on a fork in the road, and after an hour driving on small winding roads devoid of houses, without crossing a single car, shortly after

our first glimpse of the ocean behind a bend, we were blocked by a massive herd of several hundred beautiful goats crossing the street.

The goats were in no hurry, and given the size of the convoy ambling down the hill, I parked in the shade of a tree, cut the motor and opened the window. We explained to our excited dog that he had to calm down, put him on a short leash and walked towards the shepherd standing on the side of the road. His two dogs barked as we approached, until the shepherd gave them a short order and the dogs returned towards the herd.

These were typical local goats, as Rúben later explained. *Cabras algarvias* are big animals with twisted horns that can stretch up to almost a meter on each side of their heads. They come in various shades and colours, but to see several hundreds of them, equally coloured light ochre goats with a dark brown patches around eyes and muzzles, scattered over the red brown earth, it seemed like a picture out of a glossy magazine.

The movement of the herd stalled when a good half of the animals had found new matter to chew on at the other side of the road. Although they seemed remarkably well groomed, the typical pungent smell of goats filled the hot air.

It was past noon on an exceptionally torrid day in early August. We were sitting on a small stonewall, under a huge carob tree. Stepping from the blazing sun into the shade of a carob tree is an amazing experience. The temperature seems

to drop by several degrees, generating a light wind that sweeps over your skin. It is a step from hell into heaven.

Rúben seemed to enjoy answering our numerous queries, all the while asking from time to time a polite question about us, and our lives in the Algarve. Given the heat, it was not what you would call a vivid conversation, more like long moments of silence interspersed with a sentence here and there. It was sweltering hot; we started to feel it even under the carob tree.

I just wondered if we should not rather go back to our car and switch on the air conditioning, when Rúben turned towards us and smiled. “Hot, isn’t it?” I rolled my eyes, drew out a breath and flapped my skirt to illustrate that he had nailed it.

“Well, to entertain you until my herd decides to move on,” Rúbens started, “let me tell you a story from the place where I was born, up in the Alentejo. It’s probably the hottest corner of Portugal, if not of all the Iberian Peninsula. So hot, it can cook your brain if you don’t pay attention and wear a hat. A shepherd knows that and still, spending our lives in the sun, perhaps we get so used to the heat that we get careless. At least this might be your impression when you listen to what I will recount.”

“I was told it’s a true story, which happened on one of these really hot days up there in my country. Two shepherds where sitting together under a tree. I’ll call them Rui and

António, but those were not their real names. So, they were sitting together in silence, close to a nearly dried up pond.”

“The scorching sun made the air glimmer. There was no wind, not even the smallest breath. Both men were dozing, when a huge toad dropped in front of their eyes, lifting a cloud of dust. It had probably left the warm backwater of the puddle in hope to find a better pond, but it was completely exhausted by the exercise in the blistering sun. None of the men moved, but their eyes turned towards the toad.”

“After two more dusty plops, the toad rested in a small patch of shade not far from the men. They both stared at it for a long moment, before António cleared his voice and said ‘Rui, if you eat that toad, I will give you my best buck.’”

“A buck or billy is a male goat used for reproduction, and António’s best buck was some sort of celebrity in the area. He was more like a proficient stallion, judging by the size of António’s herd. Rui turned towards the smirking António and then, more by defiance, picked up the toad. It was huge and hung in his big hand, with half closed eyes and flabby legs, totally stunned by heat and exhaustion.”

“Rui badly needed a capable buck, his own was a bit lazy and he didn’t have the money to buy one on the market. So with a quick sidewise glance at his mate, Rui closed his eyes and took a big bite.”

“Oh no!” Colette was deeply shocked and made such a disgusted face that Rúben laughed aloud.

“Yes, that’s what he did. He had the upper half of the toad in his mouth, while the rear part still rested in front of his eyes, with entrails dangling from his right hand and greenish brown juices dripping down on his feet. In his haste to get the toad swallowed, he had taken such a big bite that he couldn’t even chew. He was heaving badly and had a compelling urge to spit the disgusting mush into the sand. Still, there was António’s buck, and while he hastily choked down what he had in his mouth, he tried to motivate himself to swallow the remaining part. But even closing his eyes didn’t help to rid himself of the gruesome sight.”

“António was now fully awake. He couldn’t believe what he saw. His lower jaw had dropped, and his eyes were wide open. Half of his billy had gone! But Rui was still heaving spasmodically; the taste in his mouth was awful. Compared to the idea of swallowing the other repugnant piece of slush in his hand, the need for a good buck receded into the furthest corner of his mind. “António if you eat the other half of the toad, I will give you back my half of your billy.”

“António had seen what Rui was capable to do, and he didn’t balk a single second. He grabbed the piece of dribbling pulp and shoved it into his mouth. It was horrible. Twice he feared he would throw up, but given the height of the stakes, he finally managed to keep it down.”

“After that they sat there in silence. Both felt relieved. For a moment, they had forgotten the sweltering heat, but finally it crept back into their mind, and not only that. It was Rui

who brought it up. His elbows resting on his knees he looked into the distance and said “António, tell me, after all, why did we eat that toad?”

Rúben laughed aloud, stood up and stretched. The whole herd was now on the other side of the road, and apart from several hundred olive coloured marbles strewn over a large expanse of the tarmac, the street was clear. “Rúben, with all my respect, I know this story, and as far as I know it didn’t happen in the Alentejo.”

Rúben turned and looked a long moment at me before he answered. “It could have happened in the Alentejo, and probably did sometime in the past. We had all the ingredients up there: poverty, goats, heat and toads. I believe it’s a Portuguese story, because there is a lot of wisdom in it. It’s also one of those stories where the narrator has all of the fun. And besides, I had to distract you until my goats decided to move on.”

With that, he winked at us, whistled for his dogs and went down the slope, leaving us agape behind.



A dream went wrong

"I don't think Dino is a bad person. He simply doesn't understand the issue." Tiago seemed genuinely concerned. We were sitting on the terrace of the *Café da Praça*, in the shade of huge flowering jacaranda trees. My partner Colette was not at home and it was Friday, the day Loreta, the owner's wife, serves her illustrious Cataplana. When I arrived at the *Café da Praça*, tourists already took most of the tables, including my favourite spot. Tiago was sitting on his usual bench below the church wall, on the other side of the square. I waved him over to share the only free table with me.

The group of holidaymakers was obviously unexpected, which somehow reassured me. I dreaded the idea of Loretta's Cataplana becoming internationally renowned, attracting entire busloads of tourists to our village. While we patiently waited our turn to be served, Tiago started to relate a knotty problem. To understand the matter, a few facts are important to know.

While the centre of our village has preserved its authenticity as a true Portuguese community, with a typical mix of farmers, artisans and elderly people, the beautiful panoramic ocean view from the slopes North of the village had attracted wealthier residents. A few were retired and

actually living here, but most of the properties were holiday homes belonging to well-heeled Portuguese from the North or nationals from other European countries. According to Tiago, most of the properties outside the village had changed owners several times over the last thirty years, with prices multiplied by two or three each time.

Secondly, to build a house in the countryside in Portugal, there has necessarily to be a ruin on your plot. That is not the only requirement, and you will face a multitude of other restrictions and legal obligations. Portuguese bureaucracy is legendary, and the building rules are frequently modified by both the national and local administrations, not to mention the evolving European regulations. It is for the least a complicated matter.

Now, according to Tiago, the story all started when the heirs of a deceased person from the village wanted to sell a small plot of land on the Northern slopes. The plot had neither a ruin nor a real access, and it overlooked two high-priced properties. Therefor the value of this property was rather limited.

“As the owners of the neighbouring properties showed no interest in buying the rocky outcrop, the heirs sold it cheap, to someone from a nearby village. I know him well, his name is Dino, he is a good guy. You can easily imagine that Dino couldn’t believe his luck, to own a piece of land in this posh environment. He intended to build a small cabin, where he could spend the weekends with his wife and daughter and

invite friends over for a barbecue. He didn't waste any time and immediately opened an old donkey path, by bulldozing its century old dry stone walls, to widen the access for a small truck."

"All this happened in the absence of the owners of the two pricey neighbouring properties. When they arrived for a short holiday, Dino had already raised a sizeable prefabricated cabin and started to embellish the arid piece of land by planting olive, carob and almond trees. A bright blue water tank next to the cabin was filled every week, but barely allowed him to keep the plants alive. "

"The following weekend, while Dino arrived at his plot to finish the inside of his cabin, his two wealthy neighbours walked up to him. Dino thought this was a good opportunity to ask if he could connect to one of their boreholes. But he had no chance to place a single word. The two neighbours were fuming. One of them was Portuguese, while the other was a grand blonde-haired person, probably Swedish. They ordered him to immediately demolish the cabin and rebuild the old stone walls of the donkey path, threatening to file a complaint if it wasn't done within a week. Did Dino think he was above the laws, destroying historical masonry and building a hovel next to their multi-million properties?"

At this point, one of the tourists from a table next to ours interrupted Tiago. The man leaned over and touched Tiago's shoulder. While looking at his smartphone, he told Tiago, in decently constructed but badly pronounced Portuguese, that

this village is a pretty place. In spite of this quite rude interruption, Tiago smiled at him. “I would love to live here” the tourist continued, still reading from his phone. “How are the people in this village?” Tiago looked mildly annoyed when the tourist held out the mobile close to his face to record the reply. He asked in return “How are the people where you live?”

The tourist looked at his phone, obviously reading the automated translation. He answered his phone in English and then read the text in Portuguese “Dreadful, they are jealous, mean and rude, at best we ignore each other.”

Tiago looked at him for a moment, perhaps appraising if the man was serious. Finally he told him “I’m afraid, but it will be the same here.” Then he turned back towards me, abruptly ending the conversation. I was a little surprised by Tiago’s answer, but supposed he referred to the issue we were discussing, or that he was annoyed by the interruption.

“Dino was speechless” he continued, “While his neighbours stomped away, he sat down on one of the garden chairs he had brought along that same day. His dream was crumbling. He had imagined a cordial neighbourly relationship, sharing their borehole water and perhaps even installing a counter, to get electricity from them, inviting them to his barbecue parties and keeping an eye on their properties while they were away. But this was a bad start.”

“When we met the next day, here in the *Café da Praça*, Dino told me his story. When he bought the land, Dino had

been given a thirty-year-old letter signed by a former mayor, who authorized the construction of a house on the plot. He also believed that you could always put a removable cabin, anywhere, even on non-buildable land. I explained to him that all the wrongs were on his side, and why. The rumour that you can put a removable house anywhere is a myth. There are strict limitations, only a small tool shed is allowed on non-buildable land. He didn't believe me."

"But we were standing at the counter, and Ricardo had listened into our conversation. His son works for the Urban Services of the Faro council. When Ricardo confirmed what I had said, adding that a thirty-year-old letter was worthless, because laws and regulations have changed a dozen times since then. Dino confessed that he had spent all his money to realize his dream.

Then Ricardo drove the nail in. If the neighbours filed a complaint, he said, Dino would receive an official order to demolish. If he didn't comply, he'll receive a hefty fine. If he didn't pay the fine and demolish within 30 days, he'll receive another fine, and so on. Once the amount of fines exceeds the tax value of the land, they will seize the property and put it on auction. Hearing this, Dino was devastated. He stood there a moment in silence, then he paid and left."

"Ricardo said he couldn't believe that a grown up could be so naïve, as to invest all his money on a thirty year old letter. We discussed the matter a while longer, until I left as well."

Tiago looked at the jacaranda flowers above our table. “The next morning, when I came to take my coffee, Ricardo told me that Dino was in jail.” Tiago lowered his gaze. “Apparently, after leaving the night before, he went up to his cabin and set it on fire. The neighbours had called the police and when they arrived with the firemen, Dino was still standing there, looking at the flames devour his dream and his money.”



We both sat a moment in silence, until Tiago added, “I don’t think Dino is a bad person. He got crazy, because he did not understand the problem.”

At that moment, the tourists rose from their tables. One of them, an English man with a russet, chubby face and laughing eyes, stopped in front of us and said in a rather decent Portuguese “Sua aldeia é muito bonita e comemos bem aqui.¹⁰” He continued in Portuguese. “I wouldn’t mind to come and live here, with Brexit and all. How are the people in this village?”

Tiago looked up, obviously still a bit lost in his story. “How are the people where *you* live?” he asked.

“Really nice,” replied the man, “they are friendly, generous and always helpful.”

Tiago looked the man straight into the eyes and answered with a big smile “You’ll see, it’s like that here too.”

The tourist nodded, waved a hand at both of us and followed the others to the bus.

¹⁰ “Your village is pretty, and you eat well here.”

A Christmas story

“Such things take time.” Emilio poked at the embers of the fireplace and the log ignited, projecting orange reflections on the walls of the great salon.

A pleasant smell drifted from the kitchen, where Iria explained to Colette that neither she nor Emilio eat meat, but this meal was a Portuguese Christmas tradition, and they served meat because her guests expect it. The mixed scent of the oven and burning candles was also a pleasant reminder of her happy childhood.

Iria had also invited her elderly neighbours, so they would not spend Christmas Eve alone. Our daughter Clara played chess with the 85-year-old Matilde, while Matilde’s husband commented the moves in Portuguese. Clara does not speak the language, but all three laughed a lot when Clara tried to explain Matilde’s mistakes.

There were other friends of Iria sitting at the long table, but of her two children, only her daughter Leonor had come, with her husband and two children. Iria’s son Renato was backpacking somewhere in Tanzania. Iria seemed to be in a good spirits, but we knew her well enough to notice that something was wrong.

“Six months is a long time” I said to Emilio. “I went to her office in late September and didn’t notice anything at all. Both seemed in good spirits.” Emilio hung the iron rod next to the fireplace. “That’s at work. Privately they haven’t talked since June.”

Iria was born in the Azores, where she spent her childhood in a rather modest environment. She lives only for her two children, whom she raised alone. To give them a good education, she had worked for several years in a Lisbon hospital. She is now settled with her adult children in the Algarve. Leonor is a musician and Renato, a young doctor, has recently started working in his mother’s office.

Emilio explained the reason for their dispute. Last June Renato told his mother that he did not want to spend his time in an office, because for him ‘there are more important things in life than the worries and laments of privileged elderly people’. That triggered a passionate conflict, and they have not spoken to each other since then.

“After Eleonor changed from her medical studies to music, she hoped that Renato continues and will become financially independent. However, she should accept their decisions. You can’t force your children into a way of life.”

“Did she try to talk to him again?”

“The two are quite headstrong. He’s been traveling for a month now and hasn’t called his mother yet.” I could imagine

how Iria was feeling, with no news from her son backpacking in the African bush.

Emilio and Iria knew each other for only a few years. Iria had been tired of men, but the inconspicuous Emilio, with his calm and sensitive manner, had won the heart of this energetic, independent woman. When talking to Emilio, she told us once, she gets the impression that his gentle eyes and peaceful gaze looks deep into her mind, leaving behind some kind of serenity.

“The roast will soon be ready, perhaps we should start.” Iria came out of the kitchen and helped Clara and Matilde to put the chess pieces away. Much to the reluctance of her daughter, Leonor also cleared the dominoes.

The numerous appetizers were carried to the table, and when everyone was seated, Emilio asked us to each take the hand of our two table neighbours. Then he spoke in a local dialect that I did not understand. Every now and then someone laughed, and his last sentences contained words like ‘tolerance’ and ‘completeness’. After that, there was a moment of silence, until he looked at Iria and asked her to start, “...otherwise we will still be sitting here, when the roast had long been charred”.

Then the telephone rang.

“Please don’t answer, ma, I will.” Leonor knew that even on Christmas Eve, her mother would not refuse a patient’s call. She walked around the long table into the hallway and

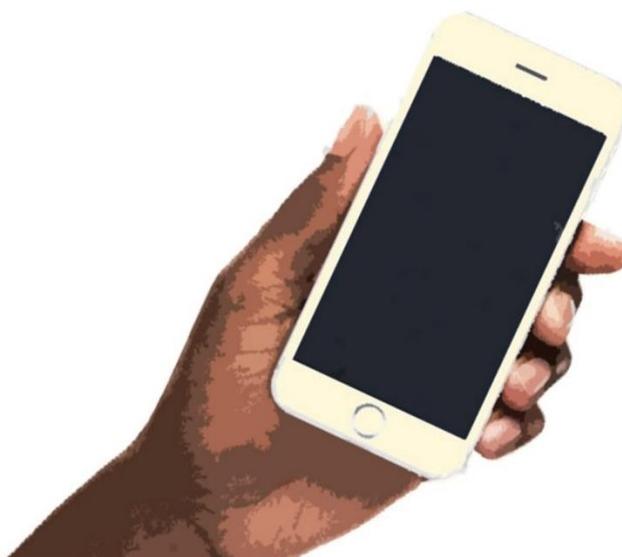
picked up the smartphone. She listened a moment, then came back and wordlessly handed it to her mother.

After a moment, the table went so quiet that we heard the wood cracking in the fireplace. None of us wanted to listen into the conversation, but we were embarrassed to see tears rolling down from Iria's cheeks. Only Emilio smiled into his plate.

Iria did not say a word. She listened in silence, for a long time. Then she glanced around with glittering eyes.

"Yes, Renato, that is what we will do" she said. Then she handed the phone to Leonor and explained that she had just received her gift before the meal.

Hearing this, Leonor's daughter was protesting, she also wanted to have her present now!



Mr Alechenko's wedding party

It was like going to a job interview in a swimming costume. I felt seriously under-dressed, when the major-domo threw us a glance of disdain. Although Marcos had asked me to avoid jeans and rather wear some neutral, dark clothes, he did not warn me that we'd be surrounded by several hundred tuxedos and Haute Couture designer dresses disembarking from Bentleys, Rolls and Ferraris. We had just arrived at the property of a Russian investment banker, Mikhaeil Alechenko, to film his wedding party.

Marcos is a photographer. With his small slim stature and oversized moustache, he looks like a clone of Freddie Mercury, including charisma and a disarming sense of humour. To finance his passion of kooky portraits by means of idiosyncratic short-films, he earns a living as an event photographer. His creativity and the quality of his work, paired with a lot of temerity and an innate sense for networking, engendered sufficient notoriety to secure him high profile jobs with the rich and famous on the Southern Iberian coast between Marbella and Carvoeiro.

His experienced assistant, who knows his way of working and usually carries the sizable load of material, was not available today. As Marcos was told that Mr Alechenko had asked for "discrete photographers who should be invisible",

he had opted for a light mobile equipment. Thus, a rookie like me was okay to replace his assistant. We are good friends and when he asked me if I could give him a hand, – “unforgettable experience guaranteed” -- I did not hesitate.

On arrival I had the feeling, that instead of being invisible, we rather stuck out like fluorescent penguins. But then, I was astonished to notice that we were almost transparent.

We were in Quinta de Lago, a huge expanse of luxury properties located West of Faro, surrounded by lush vegetation and exotic gardens maintained by armies of gardeners. When driving along the exquisite *calçadas* shaded by flowering trees, you feel more like being in Florida or Singapore than in the Algarve.

The palatial residence of Mr Alechenko is built on the top of a hill. The location was ingeniously chosen, as it enjoys a breath-taking 360-degree view of the ocean in front and the treetops behind. The property thus seems to stretch up to the first mountain range, offering no views of other houses. It is strikingly beautiful, in the delusive way of luxury holiday resorts.

Surrounded by a park that covers the slopes of the hill with large expanses of meticulously trimmed grass, shaded by huge century old trees, the palace pans out across several ample terraces towards the sea.

“You’d think he invited the whole jet-set between Marbella and Lisbon” I gasped as we hurried both heavily loaded along the back lanes assigned to the deliverymen.

We were already late, and the party obviously started some time ago, but the security personal wouldn’t let Marcos drive his battered Renault Kangoo up to the residence and had forced us to park in an inconspicuous area about 500 meters away.

“They came ... from all over ... the world” Marcos puffed. He carried the heaviest equipment, which included his Panavision camera and a bulky crate containing his new jewel and pride: a lightweight drone he recently had custom built for his needs. It could fly almost 45 minutes and was equipped with an array of three tiny high-resolution video cameras that sent the encoded images directly to his server at home.

As soon as we arrived at the white tent that was assigned to the staff, Marcos quickly unpacked his camera, while he explained that my job consisted in keeping an eye on his equipment.

“Dammit! I left the batteries of the camera in the car” he blurted. “They’re below the dashboard, I ...”

The event manager interrupted further explanations, when he peered in through the door. “Hurry up, Marcos, you need to film the bride preparing with her maids, they’re almost finished.”

Marcos grabbed his camera, and while rushing towards the door, he adds over his shoulder “Fetch the batteries as fast as you can and meet me at the residence.”

I raced to the car, grabbed the equipment and dashed back to the mansion. When I was still desperately trying to convince an obnoxious security guard to show me the way to the bride’s quarters, Marcos appeared on the stairs, grinning at me.

He led me a back to the tent, where he explained “I had no choice but to hold the heavy Panavision in one hand and film the whole scene on my smartphone, holding it above the camera as if it was some measuring device. The women didn’t pay any attention. It’s a high end smartphone, the image quality will be OK, and I can still improve it on the computer.”

During the actual wedding ceremony, under a huge rotunda decorated with the most exquisite flower arrangements and facing the sea, I could admire Marcos’ skilfulness. With a sure eye for scenery, light and viewing angles, he seemed to be everywhere at once, all the while no one appeared to notice him rushing around.

The guests included a wide assortment of cultural backgrounds. The main language was English, spoken with heavy Scottish, Italian, French and Russian accents, but I also recognized Chinese, African, and Central Asian invitees.

The scraps of conversation I heard from guests passing in front of my tent included the advantage of getting your dog groomed in Florida rather than California, the benefits of living in Monaco as compared to Dubai, the new regulations regarding underground extensions in Central London or the latest rejuvenating stem cell treatments to be found in China.

Numerous security guards, recognizable by their black sunglasses, bulging vests and the cable spirals behind their neck, stood at regular intervals around the crowd or walked across the park. While the guests seemed accustomed and didn't pay any attention, absorbed by the ceremony or discussing in small groups, for an outsider like me the effect was rather oppressive, to a point that I wondered if I had brought all my papers along.

It was now the turn of the best man to give his speech. He swayed a bit when he walked up to the microphone and stood in front of the crowd. He searched his pockets, obviously looking for his notes. After slurring a few words, he sat down again, waving his hands to indicate that he had no intention to return. He was utterly drunk.

Looking around, I noticed that a few of the guests showed first signs of inebriation. They were shouting across the lanes, laughing excessively loud, making abusive gestures or reacted aggressively towards a waiter, because he had brought a glass instead of the whole bottle. It was a stark contrast to their classy dresses and the upscale environment.

Marcos came back and opened the crate to reveal his drone. Once deployed, it had a wingspan of one and a half meters; but when I held it while Marcos fixed the tiny cameras, it was surprisingly light. “Titanium frame draped with solar tarps and a lithium polymer battery” he explained while he clicked a few other tiny electronic parts into place. “It cost me an arm and a leg, but it works great.” The drone lifted into the air without any noise. “E-prop helices” Marcos grinned, while we followed the images recorded by the three cameras on a large tablet computer.

At that moment, we noticed some agitation among the guests. Marcos put the drone in stationary flight and we both turned towards the crowd. There seemed to be a dispute between several people, and I was wondering if the excessive alcohol consumption had prompted the next stage. All of a sudden, I heard four dry pops, a bit like small firecrackers. Several security guards hurried towards the place where the noise seemed to originate.

I was still watching the commotion, when Marcos shouted, “Where is the drone?” The tablet screen was black and we could not spot anything in the sky. We rushed into the park. While Marcos searched the ground and I scrutinized the trees, a guard walked towards us, pointing a bit further and said “over there”. Broken drone parts were scattered across the ground; it was completely destroyed. While I collected what I could carry, Marcos stormed back towards the residence.

Shortly after I had put the sad remains of Marcos' drone back into the crate, he came to fetch his camera. "No aerial video then" he said, not particularly troubled, "I'll film it all from the ground". I asked him what happened and why he did not appear to be upset.

"It seems that a drunken guy took a pot-shot at the drone", he explained. "Mr Alechenko doesn't want any fuss and paid what I asked for, which includes a new drone and a month without work"

"That's a bulky pack of money", he added. "I only hope, as the evening goes on, no one will shoot at me. For once I might restrain from flirting."

Then, with a large grin and a wink towards a young women smiling back at him, he picked up his camera and disappeared into the crowd.



Magic in the park

“*Cão do barrocal algarvio*¹¹” I said, while I was trying to untangle Raffi’s leash from the three others belonging to John’s dogs. It was a hopeless jumble of knots. The four dogs did not help; instead, they turned around each other and tried to pull in opposite directions.

I had met John only a few minutes ago, while I was preparing to leave the park and return to our car. Raffi was delighted by this last minute encounter with three more fellows and stoically accepted their close body inspection, while I exchanged a few one-liners with John. The entanglement started, when John approached us to offer his hand and present himself.

We were in the ‘*Parque Municipal de Loulé*¹²’, with its well-maintained expanses of grass, connected by wavy lanes and shaded by a dense canopy of huge plane and pine trees. Raffi loves the park for its unparalleled wealth of smells and the occasional encounter with other dogs. I like it, because Portuguese families meet here, sometimes in large groups of twenty or more, complete neighbourhoods or extended families, associations, groups of young people bantering,

¹¹ Dog of the Algarvian Barrocal

¹² Municipal park of Loulé

yoga classes or teenagers with their guitars. It was late afternoon, in early May. The park was teeming with life and the body density was comparable to the beaches in high season.

Even seeing him from far away, I was sure John was English. English expats living in Portugal have two or three dogs. Like other Mediterranean countries, Portugal has a problem with abandoned cats and dogs. English expats drive around to restock the feeding places to which they accustomed the animals, and sometimes adopt them.

Raffi is also a former stray dog, but in this case, he had adopted us. The first time I noticed him, he was standing in the middle of the street, not far from our home. At the time, he looked skinny and a bit dazed. Therefore, I honked to warn him of my approaching car. The next day he appeared in our garden. At closer inspection, he was only skin and bones. My partner managed to gain his confidence and we took him to a vet. There we learned that Raffi had a broken jaw, and his body was covered with bruises. With a broken jaw, he could neither eat nor defend himself. Had he not come to our house, less than a week later he would have been dead.

The vet told us that Raffi was still very young and a pure “*Cão do Barocal Algarvio*”, an old Portuguese breed directly descendant from the Moorish hunting dogs introduced in the 8th century, which in turn were descendants of Egyptian greyhounds.

“Never heard of that breed” John answered, while we were both still trying to undo the knots, “mine are simple stray dogs”.

“Raffi as well, John. But listen, I will unleash him and we’ll both stand aside. It will give you a better chance to untangle this mess.”

While I sat in the grass, holding my dog and listening to John recounting the story of his three adoptees, I closed my eyes to enjoy the warmth and the smells of spring. In the background, behind John’s voice, I heard the Loulé Rugby team on their training ground next to the park. The air was filled with the joyful screams of several dozen children, echoing from under the canopy.

Opening my eyes again, I noticed a man with a colourful frock carrying an upright bass. He looked out of place among this motley crowd. When he found a patch of empty space amid the people, he started tuning his instrument. Within less of a minute, four other musicians equally dressed in extravagant clothes appeared from different directions; there were two flutes, a violin and some sort of a xylophone. Once they had joined, next to their fellow musicians, they did not even greet each other, but immediately started to play a few notes of what I immediately recognized as *Primo Vere* or ‘Spring’, the third movement of *Carmina Burana*.

A young woman, who until now sat discussing with others in the middle of the crowd, stood up and started singing the Latin text with a surprisingly strong voice that managed to

overlay the ambient noise in the park. One by one, three other women stood up in other parts of the crowd, and while walking through the groups of people, they answered the same way.

By now, many children had stopped playing and most adults had turned their heads towards the musicians. A few more wood and brass wind instruments appeared out of nowhere, and two men brought a pair of timpani. Until then, the park guests appeared only mildly surprised. However, when the timpani started their powerful banging, and almost simultaneously several dozen men and women stood up from the afternoon crowd and launched the awesome *Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi* in one thunderous voice, the whole park had transformed into a concert hall.

It was not the full orchestration, but more than fifty musicians were playing and as many choristers were spread over a large area, among the crowd. The reverberation below the canopy was astounding. Even the group of teenagers from the roller skate ground watched rapturously.

When the movement stopped rather abruptly, there was a moment of silence, before several hundred people gathered in the park jumped up to their feet and started clapping their hands and shouting approval for several minutes. Most of them would never have even thought of visiting a concert hall. This surprise performance in such an unusual place added to the incredible effect.

The performers played a few other chosen pieces of Carl Orff's cantata. Afterwards, musicians and singers were engaged in discussions, many were invited by the people to sit down with them and share their food and drinks, thus transferring *Carmina Burana* into the real life.

"Sorry about this leash entanglement". John had finally managed to solve the knots.

"On the contrary John, I'm really glad it happened. I was on my way home. If it wasn't for our dogs, I would have missed this unique event!"

"Pleased to hear that." John smiled, "it shows that everyone should adopt a stray dog in Portugal. They enrich your life."

"I can only agree. As Freddy Mercury said, 'It's a kind of magic'. Have a good weekend, John!"

We only raised our hands to say goodbye. Better safe than sorry.



Lost in the hills

The chilly wind and overcast sky added to the grim appearance of the sparsely covered hills. A quick glance on my old mobile phone showed that there was no coverage and that we had walked by now for more than two hours. A while ago, we had left what could still have passed for a trail and were by now wandering aimlessly across the hills; at least that was my impression. It was impossible to make out the sun behind the heavy clouds, so I had no indication to be sure that we had not walk in circles.

We were somewhere North East of Salir, a vast, mostly uninhabited area, where a few long abandoned ruins are the only signs of human presence. The landscape has nothing inviting. Long ago, these hills were probably covered with forests, but centuries of mismanagement and fire have gradually transformed them into a dry bush land.

My companion did not talk a lot. Afonso must be more than ninety years old. We met in the late morning at his house in *Cabaça*. The hamlet is located quite a few kilometres of dirt track away from the nearest village. It consists of a dozen ruins and a single house that seemed to be inhabitable.

Afonso was standing in front of the door. Strangely enough, he seemed to be expecting me. He waved away the explanations for my visit, slung a small bundle over his shoulder and started on a trail up into the hills. I only had time to pick up my gourd from the car, and quickly hurry after him, so I wouldn't lose him from sight. On my way past the door of his house, an old woman held out a paper bag and disappeared before I could thank her. It contained a dozen dry figs.

I had envisioned this to be more fun. It was a first apex after weeks of investigation, following my intention to write a paper about the preservation of pagan practices in the Algarve.

I wasn't particularly interested in sorcery, although like many others of my generation, I had been a keen reader of the 'Don Juan' stories, the vibrant narrations of Carlos Castaneda's encounters with Mexican "men of knowledge". Otherwise, I consider myself down to earth and rather suspicious of fashionable supernatural beliefs.

My interest was awakened, when Raisa, the Portuguese wife of a German friend, told me about her 'healing gifts' that apparently ran in her family and were transmitted through the lineage of women. She used the term '*bruxa*' or sorceress to describe her grandmother.

It seemed curious to me that such beliefs and practices had survived in a country where the inquisition had been ferocious and the domination by the Catholic Church in the

subsequent centuries was almost totalitarian. I decided to learn more about it, and in my experience, it is always best to start at the root, which in this case meant that I had to find an authentic *bruxa* to get answers to my questions.

Raisa considered herself a *bruxa*, something I seriously doubted. If this gift had ever really run in her family, it was now perverted by New Age beliefs and other fashionable additions.

However, to start such an investigation from scratch is not easy. When you try to talk about sorcery to people you know, they either smile at you or change the subject. By insisting for months on steering the conversation into this direction, with about everyone I met, I didn't achieve any more than getting a stamp on my forehead: "totally nuts".

The following year, a chance encounter in Porto revived my quest. Paula was a student in anthropology at the University of Coimbra and although she was not specialized in this matter, she confirmed that pagan beliefs were still very strong in remote areas of the country. In addition, she provided a name of a person to talk to, the first of a long line of people that weeks later finally led me into these forlorn hills.

It was early March. A cold wind was blowing hard, but didn't manage to chase the heavy clouds. Afonso hadn't said a word since we started our walk two hours before, so I did not know where we were heading and only hoped that Afonso knew. He was walking at a brisk unwavering pace,

and given his age, I felt too ashamed to ask for a rest. He finally stopped at the top of a hill. It was a unique, somehow frightening sight. All around us, as far as eyes could reach, was an ocean of undulating hills, without any distinctive landmark that I could make out. If Afonso was lost, I had no idea how we would find our way back.

“Jeez, Senhor Afonso, you sure are in excellent form.” I drank from my gourd and offered it to him, but he declined with a gesture, without even turning his head. He looked intensely into one direction and when I followed his gaze, I saw a green patch at the foot of a hill about a kilometre away.

“Is that where we are heading?” I pointed in the direction of the patch.

Afonso turned briskly to face me. His eyes were surprisingly clear and his gaze intense. “This is where Sabela lived all her life. Why do you want to meet her?”

I tried to avoid answering his question directly. By experience, wanting to write a story about sorcery is usually not perceived as a sufficient reason to meet one.

“Didn’t they explain to you?”

“Who?” Afonso’s gaze intensified.

“Well, those who told you that I will come today.”

“She told me last week that you will come today. I didn’t speak to anyone else.” He emphasized the *she*, and I supposed he referred to his wife, although I wondered how *she* would have known.

While picking a fig from the paper and offering him the bag, I used the opportunity to change the subject.

“How can anyone survive out here, there aren’t even proper trails.”

“She has water and finds all she needs in the surroundings. I come by every month to bring matches, sugar and salt.”

“How old is she?”

“My age.” That answer was not very helpful, but Afonso already started down the hill, so I followed.

Twenty minutes later we approached what from above looked like a lush green patch, but now revealed to be an impenetrable thicket. Huge trees were overgrown with ivy and thorns and dense vegetation had invaded the ground. In the midst of the tangle stood a small house, looking abandoned. Afonso stood a few steps away and gazed at the scene.

I could not believe that the old man had brought me all this way out here, only to show me a ruin. So I pushed aside the dense vegetation to knock on the door. As no one answered, I tried the handle. It was not locked. I opened a

gap and shouted "*Boa tarde, Sra Sabela, posso entrar na sua casa? Estou aqui com a Sr Afonso, para visitar.*"¹³" No answer.

I pushed the door completely and looked into the large single room house. Everything was perfectly tidy, the pots and pans along the mantelpiece, bunches of dry herbs hanging from the rafters, dozens of jars containing assortments of plants and other matters neatly arranged on shelves.

Above the perfectly made bed, along the rear wall, hung a small poster of the Dalai Lama and another of the Virgin Mary, surrounded by a few yellow photos and several pieces of paper pinned to the wall. A single chair stood in front of a small table and on the table nothing but a plate, a glass and a jar. It almost seemed as if someone had just left ... if it was not for the thick layer of dust that covered everything.

I closed the door and found Afonso where I left him five minutes ago, still staring at the house. "No one had been living here for years, Sr Afonso. Please be honest, when did you see Sra Sabela the last time?"

Afonso looked at me with bewildered eyes. "It was last week, when she told me that you will come. Right here, in front of her house. She was tending to her garden. I even told her that I was jealous of such beautiful flowers early March."

¹³ Good afternoon, Mrs. Sabela, may I come into your house? I'm here with Mr. Afonso to visit.

His expression was sincere, a mixture of shock and confusion; he seemed totally convinced of what he just told me. I started to wonder about the implication. Could I trust this old troubled man to find our way back?

When I lifted my eyes to the heavy sky, a tiny opening in the dense cloud cover let pass a ray of sunshine, and for a short instant the scenery lit up.

At that moment the hills started talking.



Five tests

“This is as close as you can get to Rio without leaving the Algarve”, Inês beamed at me before opening the door to the large room. A boom box played loud African rhythms, and Inês danced into the room, followed by me foolishly grinning at the smiling faces that greeted us.

Although it was Wednesday evening, there were several dozen women and men working in the room. Some used the large tables, others sat on chairs scattered around the room or simply on the floor. Most of them were sewing accessories, like pearls, brightly coloured feathers, buttons or glitter on to their vibrant costumes, while a few tried them on, helped by their mates. A small group was painting large paper-maché figurines, and a few dancers tried new steps on the platform raised at one end of the room.

“Welcome to the *Companhia Cassima*” Inês said as she turned towards the room and shouted ‘Who needs some help?’ My friend here wants to spend the evening with us, so let’s put him to work!” Several women shouted joking remarks that I could not understand, but as they laughed while looking towards me, I held up my arms and asked “*Então, quem precisa de uma mão?*¹⁴” after which the whole

¹⁴ “So, who needs a hand?”

group burst into a resounding laughter. I had obviously made my entry.

Inês is not exactly how you would imagine a carnival dancer. She is about 60 years old, with a pleasant round face and is rather robustly built. She earns her living as a street cleaner in Loulé. Inês has become a good friend after a chance encounter a couple of years ago, when she helped me avoid a parking ticket. When we met last Saturday, she told me that she is part of a carnival dance team.

According to Inês, being part of a dance team means hard work, but it's also very rewarding and it gives her a sense of belonging. "We want to give back to the community that has either raised or welcomed us." She had been part of various bands, but prefers the *Companhia Cassima*, which she joined a few years ago.

Most of the groups are from either the same high school, association, neighbourhood or club. Each has its own style, rules and philosophy. She likes her team in particular, because they are open-minded and do not take themselves too seriously. According to her, they are a motley blend of many cultural backgrounds, with civil servants, nurses, employees, artisans and workers like her. There were men and women from various South American and African countries, but also Europeans. "Even a proud Spanish guy" she joked, "and the rest are Portuguese, like me."

When I asked her if I could come and see how a carnival dance team prepares, she explained that it would be the last

week before the big parades start. Everyone will be very busy, so if I come to help, I would certainly be welcomed. “We are a rather small team, because we have only three *alas* and three *carros alegoricos*.”

Alas, I learned, are groups of dancers dressed in a similar way. During the parade, they are separated by the *carros alegoricos*, or “floats”, which are the special attraction of each Samba school, with their best dancers and most beautiful costumes on top of the floats.

While I walked around the room, admiring the exquisite dresses and looking for someone who would need some help, a voice called me “Hey brother, come and give me a hand.” When I turned around, a young woman greeted me, she was in her early twenties. “I’m Ana, and you?” Ana had just put on a gorgeous costume and obviously needed help to sew a few golden strips that had fallen off.

She wore a tight white corset with golden embroidery, attached to a wide skirt consisting of densely assembled long white feathers, overhung by green and golden fabrics. On her head, she wore a matching white feather helmet with golden embroidery framing her deep tanned face.

Once I finished sewing, she clapped her hands and shouted “*Espelho na parede, quem é a bailarina mais bonita do país?*¹⁵” While she danced and twirled laughing around

¹⁵ “Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the most beautiful dancer in the country?”

the room, she gathered shouted compliments from her companions.

After asking a friend to unbutton her, Ana disappeared behind the curtains at the end of the room. The women working with her at the table explained that Ana will be the *porta-bandeira* this year and will present the flag of the *Companhia Cassima* together with the *mestre-sala* who apparently had not yet arrived.

“Be careful with Ana”, one of the women joked, “If she sets her sights on you, she will challenge you to a duel.” The others were still laughing when Ana arrived and asked what is so funny. One of the women explained, and Ana studied me for a moment. “No, he has nothing to fear. He’s too white ... and a bit old” she finally said smiling, and the others hooted with laughter.

Ana showed me how to help her to fix more golden glitter on the long green fabrics that will overlap her feathery skirt. Now in her everyday clothes, less covered than by her Samba costume, I noticed that she looked stunning and probably had many suitors. “So you challenge your partners to a duel”, I asked, “and how many have lost?”

Ana laughed, but did not reply. After a moment, she stopped sewing and looked at me, rather seriously. “I don’t want to end up like my parents. They were very young when they fell in love and came to live in Portugal. But once my siblings arrived, my father got violent with my ma. At one point it was so bad that he was put in jail. My mother was

frightened and returned to her family in Brazil. She preferred poverty to the terror of that man.”

“Everyone thought my father was a great guy, helpful, handsome and charming. We knew his dark side; it marked me deeply and for life. Still very young I already asked myself how to make sure that I wouldn’t fall into the same trap. You may like someone and think you both have a lot in common. He may be courteous and gracious, like most men when they are courting you. But that doesn’t mean a lot. It can be a mask or perhaps he is even deluding himself. You need to get behind the facade.”

“So when I start to like someone, I make him pass a few tests.” The women at the table were silent and looked down at their work. In spite of the seriousness of what she just said, Ana smiled when she looked at me. “I start poking fun at him, that’s my first test. You can’t imagine how many guys already fail that one. They can’t bear it when a woman makes fun of them. That’s a no-go for me.”

“After that”, she said, “I ask him what his ‘ideal self’ is. I noticed that by answering this question, people are unaware that they will tell you what they expect you to be, to match that ideal.”

“If that goes well,” she continues, “I will ask to meet his friends. In most cases, his behaviour will change completely in company of his best friends. And they will reveal hidden aspects of his character. If a guy ever passes that test, he faces my second last challenge. I will invite him and a few

friends to play games. Most are seemingly bored when we begin, but you know, people get so engrossed in a game, that they let their masks drop and show their real character.”

I was impressed by the maturity and ingenuity of this young woman. For sure, she is a head-turner in the street, but her ideas about relationships contrast with her looks. “So no shooting”, I said, “you prefer psychological duelling, much better. Has anyone passed all your tests?”

At that moment the *bateria* started. Inês had explained that the drumming section or *bateria* leads the pace of the parade. The faster and stronger the pace of the *bateria*, the faster the dancers usually parade. The perfect combination of sounds emitted by the various tools used to produce the rhythm will show the creativity and versatility of the band.

The *bateria* of *Companhia Cassima* had drums of various sizes, tambourines, shakers, pans, whistles, jingle sticks, bells and *reco-reco*, which is a frame with large springs that are scraped with a small iron rod. The band seemed pretty good, and most of the people in the room dropped what they were doing to start dancing. I myself was taken by the rhythm and joined in, although a bit messily, trying to imitate a few simple paces I could pick up left and right.

After the *bateria* stopped and we were back at our table, the woman next to Ana replied in her place, “None of Ana’s suitors passed the fifth and last test so far.” Ana smiled. “A few tried, but it was pathetic”, she added. “My ultimate challenge is to ask the guy to write a poem and deliver it by

heart. It will show his creativity, his sensibility and also if he is willing to make such an unusual effort for me.”

Inês had joined us in her beautiful dress of *Ala das Baianas*, which is another exceptional feature of the *Companhia Cassima*: the *Baianas* are in fact a typical Brazilian Samba section unknown in Portugal.

This “old aunt” section of the parade is composed of older dancers in superbly elaborate dresses made of a torso, a coat, a large skirt and a hat.

“I never heard Ana explain her tests to anyone beforehand” Inês joked, “It’s like you got the results before you start the exam.” “He’s too white and too old anyway” Ana and two of her mates at the table replied in chorus, and we all laughed.

At that moment, a good-looking young man with a sympathetic smile on his face entered the room. He was dressed in a costume matching that of Ana. “Ah, o mestre-sala” Inês exclaimed and then, turning towards me, she added, “Victor just arrived three months ago from Leiria, where he had been a member of a Samba school.”

I noticed that his arrival had subtly changed the ambience in the room. A few women glanced towards our table.

The literal translation of *mestre-sala* would be “the master of the room”, but in fact, the *mestre-sala* is the partner of the *porta-bandeira*. During the parade he will dance around

her to pay tribute and protect her, as well as draw the spectators' attention to both the flag and the *portabandeira*. Mandatory dance steps and a strict set of rules regulate both their moves. They are for example forbidden to turn their backs to each other at the same time, the *portabandeira* must not let the flag wrap around her, while speaking with each other, dropping a hat or slips are serious mistakes.



When Victor came to our table and greeted each woman individually, with a little joke. Then he extended his hand to me and said jokingly "Hi, it seems that Inês has recruited a new *baiana*".

Ana was last to greet him. They smiled at each other and when they both went off towards the stage to rehearse their steps, I asked “Did he already pass the tests?”

Inês turned swiftly around and scolded me “Don’t you dare tell him anything. Not a word! Or I will make sure you get a parking fine next Saturday!”

The women at our table laughed, while Inês winked at me and went back to join the other *baianas*.

At the train station

Flávia had been silent during the entire trip. She is not very loquacious at the best of times, but since we left her home in the hills above the village, she had essentially ignored my attempts to make conversation and barely contributed with monosyllables.

When I passed her house this morning, she had asked if I could drive her early afternoon to the Loulé railway station. When I came to pick her up, she was already standing at the gate, with a small pack thrown over her shoulder. She did not answer, when I asked where she was travelling. As she seemed rather tense, I did not insist.

Located about five kilometres South of the town centre, Loulé's ancient train station had obviously recently been restored. Still preserving its 19th century characteristics, it reminds you of the toy trains some of us enjoyed as a kid. The architecture is the same for all train stations in the Algarve, but very unusual for Southern Portugal, where steep, tiled roofs and high multi-pane windows seem a bit odd. I have seen the same model in the Northern Douro valley and suppose that hundred thirty years ago, it seemed a reasonable compromise for *Infraestruturas de Portugal*, the owner of the *Linha do Algarve*, to use this type of building as a blueprint for all smaller stations across the country.

Being the only train station in Loulé's urban area of almost seventy thousand, the building seems rather cute. The waiting room is tiny, with a ticket counter right at the entrance.

The Algarve railway network is essentially one-dimensional, with one single track connecting the Spanish border to the West coast, or via Tunes to the North of Portugal. It may appear surprising that Loulé station has three tracks served by two platforms, when the three tracks reunite into a single one only five hundred meters left and right from the station, but I suppose that the two supplementary tracks are used to unblock the line when another train arrives from the opposite direction.

Flávia stopped at the counter, and I crossed the small room to look out at the platform. It was a hot day, and the two only benches under the awnings were occupied. Walking around the glossy white building, I saw that an adjacent café was closed, so I went back into the waiting room. Flávia had taken a seat against the back wall, obviously expecting me to stay until her train arrived. A middle-aged couple occupied two other seats.

I walked over to the small timetable, to check when the next train will arrive. In fact, there were two. A *Regional* slow train, which stops at every tiny station, was coming from Vila Real, heading towards Lagos. Twenty minutes later the *Intercidade* Lisbon-Faro would stop for a few minutes.

When I turned around, to ask Flávia which of the trains was hers, I saw her sitting straight on her seat, eyes closed, as if she was meditating. I did not want to disturb her, so I leant against the wall and looked around the room.

If the outside of the building is charming in an outmoded way, the inside looks barren and cold. The glossy blueish-grey paint might be new, but there is no decoration on the walls, not even posters or publicity. It could as well be a waiting room in a provincial hospital or an administration.

An elderly woman, escorted by a stylish young man, most likely her grandson, stood at the ticket counter. She was talking to the operator, while her grandson set eagerly to work on his smartphone, using both thumbs. It reminded me of my daughter laughing, when I admired her thumbs dexterity and admitted that I have never been able to achieve such accuracy with mine.

The old woman exchanged a few words with her grandson, who kissed her goodbye and left. She went to sit right next to Flávia, although there was a row of empty seats nearby.

“These youngsters today” she said to Flávia, who had her eyes still closed, “I need to tell you...”.

“Wait!” Flávia opened her eyes. Her voice was harsh. She turned towards the woman. “Did you check if your story is true?”

The old woman looked surprised. "No... no, someone else told me about it, but..."

Flávia cut her off again. "Is it pleasant?" she asked, emphasizing the last word.

The old woman hesitated. "No, not really, on the contrary, it..."

Flávia was not afraid of being impolite, as she cut off the old woman again. "Is it at least urgent?"

The woman looked completely confused. "Well, not urgent right now, but..."

Flávia now seemed really irritated. "You tell me your story is neither true, nor pleasant nor urgent. So why did you disturb me?" She sat again upright against the wall and closed her eyes.

The old woman looked at her for a moment, eyes and mouth wide open. Then she stood up and chose the seat furthest away from Flávia. While I abhor gossip myself, I was startled by Flávia's reaction and realized that I barely knew her. In fact, since we arrived in the village, I have had only a few dozen conversations with Flávia, but her sensitive restraint, her calm bemusement with mundane affairs and her unconventional wisdom convinced me over time that she was a wise woman.



The horn of the *Regional* blared in the distance, and less than a minute later the train stopped at the platform. It was a bit dirty and completely covered with moronic “*wasp*” and “*kams*” tags.

A few dozen people left the train, while the old woman and the people from the outside benches boarded it. When the commuters rushed through the waiting room, Flávia did not open her eyes. She sat straight on her seat, as if she was frozen in time.

After her recent display of irritation, I did not want to interrupt Flávia’s meditation again, nor did I want to leave without telling her. I decided to wait for the train from Lisbon to Faro, because the next after that would arrive more than one hour later.

The middle-aged couple spoke in a low voice. Leaning against the wall, almost drifting off in the heat, I overheard the man saying to his partner “When I went to Lisbon last week, I fell asleep on the train, and probably slept for a little while. When I woke up, everyone in the wagon was looking at me with strange smiles. I still don’t know why.”

“You probably spoke in your dream and told everyone where you’re hiding your money” the woman replied, smiling at him. He obviously did not think it was funny, and seemed to regret her lack of empathy, because he crossed his arms and put on a sullen face.

While Flávia had not moved, for me the twenty minutes dragged on for hours. Apart from a few cars passing, nothing was happening outside, neither on the street, nor on the platform. Choosing one of the benches under the outside awning, I looked at the hazy track in the distance. The silence of the scene and the glimmering air above the rails reminded me of old spaghetti western movies.

Still lost in my daydreams, I heard the horn of the *Intercidade* and quickly stood up, to check on Flávia. She had just come out on the platform. When the train stopped less than a minute later at our platform, a dozen passengers left the train.

I turned towards Flávia to say goodbye and ask if I shall pick her up on her return, but she looked to the other side. Following her gaze, I saw a young woman standing not far from us. She looked straight at Flávia.

For a moment, I saw the sun sparkle in the eyes of the young woman, then she rushed into Flávia's arms. "How did you know that I was coming? I didn't tell anyone."

Flávia did not reply. Instead, with tears rolling down her cheeks, she hugged the young woman for a long time. I stood there, a bit awkwardly smiling, but totally ignored by the two women.

After a while, they looked at each other and Flávia said, "You know, the day you left. I rushed after you. But when I arrived at the station, the train had just left. And I didn't know where you were going." She turned around and introduced us. I shook hands with Luana, Flávia's daughter.

On our way back home, at some moment Flávia turned towards me and said, "Do you remember, some time ago I told you that we are always looking at the train leaving the station, and we don't know if there's another one coming."

I told her I did. Flávia beamed at me. "Well, I was wrong. You need to be convinced; deep inside yourself you need to know that there is another one coming. Then it will."

I smiled while I looked at the hills in the distance. You could guess the little white windmill on the top of the range behind our village. My thoughts were still suspended, because this story seemed simply too good to be true.

In such a situation a mundane event gets us back to the ground. So believe it or not, I was relieved, when a few kilometres down the road the car broke down.





Sketches of the Algarve

Günther Höser studied Art at the Kunsthochschule in Hanover and Social Sciences in Hamburg, Nice and Paris. After ten years in upper management of a large French corporation, he created and managed a successful language engineering company. Today he is retired and lives in the Algarve.

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When we decided to go and live in the Algarve, it was not a thoroughly pondered decision. In fact, it was more like “close your eyes and stick a pin on a map”. We had been told about the beauty of the beaches, the scenic villages, and the unique climate, but nothing had prepared us for the people. The Algarve is a place in slow motion. People still take their time, for themselves and for you. Here, people pick what they consider useful from the modern world of material goods, but hold on to their values. Together with my partner I tried to understand why we love this place so much. Finally we decided that short stories would be a good way to translate our experience.

This is a book of fiction, of small adventures, where magic is woven into daily events. But it is also our life. We are really living here, and met these people. Some of the stories are almost literally narrated, as they happened, while others are recomposed and mixed with bits of imagination. Together these stories will hopefully leave the reader with a similar feeling of fondness as we have for the endearing Portuguese people, confronted with a fast changing world.